

OPINION

POLICY CHANGE

Expanding on Baker's 'Housing Choice' Incentives

Bold Steps Needed to Reform Housing in Massachusetts

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SPECIAL TO BANKER & TRADESMAN

The business community in Massachusetts recently demonstrated that it understands the urgency in passing legislation to stimulate housing production in the commonwealth. Some of the state's largest employers joined Gov. Charlie Baker to call for policy changes that will make it easier for communities to produce more housing units.



Robert Reynolds, the CEO of Putnam Investments, was quoted in State House News Service as saying, "the less you supply, the greater demand, the higher prices. That makes us less competitive as a state."

It's clear that the time is right – right now – to pass legislation that will address the housing challenge. There is a growing consensus that the commonwealth can no longer continue the business as usual policies that have stagnated the building of new housing and driven up the cost of living in Massachusetts. The data does not lie: over the past several years, only a handful of communities across the commonwealth have produced substantial numbers of new apartments – with 10 municipalities creating nearly two-thirds of all the new multifamily housing in the state. Boston alone has been responsible for a whopping 37 percent of the state's apartment construction. And currently, the commonwealth is producing less than half of the housing built at peak levels in the 1970s.

But it's also important to pass legislation that encourages new housing to be in the vibrant

places where our young professionals and seniors increasingly want to live. That means better local planning. It means a more level playing field for permitting mixed-use and multifamily projects so that it's just as easy to redevelop in walkable areas as it is to create sprawling big box stores and subdivisions in pristine landscapes. Fortunately, we have a chance to pass such a bill during this legislative session.

Support for Housing Choice

The Baker administration in December unveiled a series of "Housing Choice" incentives along with a pledge to build 135,000 new units of housing by 2025. We wholeheartedly support that target along with the ability for local cities and towns to become Housing Choice certified, which would enable them to access new grant and technical assistance programs, along with priority infrastructure funding. However, we agree with the Boston Globe that the accompanying legislative proposal is "well intended" but also "an exceedingly small step when so much more is needed."

Here is what we can do to turn the governor's "tentative" bill into a bold response to the housing crisis:

- Improve project permitting by standardizing site plan review and requiring only a simple majority vote to approve special permits that increase housing;
- Prohibit communities from using zoning rules to keep out apartments, families and people of color;
- Establish minimum rules for accessory apartments, so that single-family homeowners across the state can contribute to solving the affordable housing shortage;

- Reduce costly and time-consuming court battles by curbing frivolous appeals and encouraging alternative dispute resolution;
- Strengthen local planning by training local volunteer board members and streamlining master plans; and
- Addressing municipal concerns about the fiscal and environmental costs of sprawl development, by encouraging cluster development and appropriate mitigation.

Our goal is to pass balanced legislation that can win broad support across a range of interests. At a minimum, a successful bill will help cities and towns plan for the future; it will build more homes for the young people, families, and seniors across the commonwealth; and it will preserve and protect the environment.

There is still work to be done in the Legislature and time is short. But we have an unprecedented opportunity with political and popular momentum on our side. If we squander the chance to pass a significant legislative package now, our housing crisis promises to be significantly worse in two years. We literally cannot afford to become the San Francisco of the east. Municipalities, real estate developers, the business community and environmentalists, all of us need to set aside parochial concerns for the shared benefit of residents of this commonwealth.

Together we can send a signal to the nation that we are taking bold steps to solve our housing crisis, maintain the fiscal and environmental sustainability of our communities, and welcome new residents and investment. ◀

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